

How Did This Flag Get Ready For Display at the State Capitol?

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Exhibiting historical artifacts is always a carefully calculated event. The Minnesota Historical Society collects items that are the physical documentation of this state's experiences, events, and people. Conservators, who specialize in specific areas such as objects, paintings, paper, and textiles, play an enormous role in the care and exhibition of these collections. Before any artifact is exhibited, the appropriate conservator must examine, document, gain permission, execute treatment, and document again.

Prior to exhibition in the State Capitol on History Matters Day 2005, the Virginia 28th Regimental flag was brought to the textile conservation lab for examination. At this time the Textile Conservator took note of the current condition of the flag. Fragility of fibers, fading of dyes, areas of loss, and inheritant vices such as distortion due to construction techniques are details noted in a report that is stored permanently within the Society's files. Once the condition was documented, photographic slides were taken to provide a visual record.

The Textile Conservator then made a recommendation for exhibition. This is called a Treatment Proposal. In this instance, due to the fragile nature of the flag and its importance to Minnesota history, a passive mount was recommended that places no stress on the flag's brittle, woolen fibers. Also suggested was a consolidating underlay of sheet silk crepe, dyed to match and sewn to the flag by hand, securing errant fragments and unstable areas of loss.

The Collection Curator then reviewed the proposal treatment and approved it. The Textile Conservator must be given the authorization before treating any artifact.

Silk crepe was dyed to match the flag's red ground and hand sewn to the reverse of the unstable areas. Another fabric of red wool was also dyed to match. This fabric was applied to the mount to visually fill in areas of loss in the flag while not altering the flag itself. All treatments must be reversible and in this instance, care was taken to apply stitches with long float stitches on the reverse to aid with the fabric's removal if needed in the future.

The mount was then constructed of inert materials that will not hurt the flag. This mount has an aluminum Dow 220 Ethafoam® panel, padded with polyester felt, and covered with a cotton show fabric. Mounded padding was built up to support the flag's distorted or stretched-out red ground. Union Jack flags often stretch out over time due to the bias cut of the red ground fabric, which allows the fabric to grow. Rather than allow the red fabric to lie in folds, which promotes the breakage of fibers, we opted to pad it out supporting it overall. Another distortion in the flag includes cotton white cross bars,

which have shrunk over time, puckering the blue crossbars. This type of distortion is described as inheritant vice, meaning that it is inevitable due to the overall design. Once the mount was constructed, the flag was positioned on top of it and lies passively.

A transportation box to hold the mount and flag was constructed of acid-free corrugated board. This container protected the flag by creating a stable environment for travel to the Capitol. It also provided handling edges so we didn't touch or brush against the flag when moving it.

Once in the Capitol, the flag was positioned in the exhibition case made of safe and inert materials, designed by the Society's staff. The top of the case is a five-sided plexi-glass box that protects the flag on all sides while allowing people to examine it closely.

The exhibition process almost always involves the expertise of conservators. Treatment proposals, documentation, and approvals are all important components promoting the long-term preservation of the Minnesota Historical Society collections.